

# Lead in Construction

## Hazard Alert



Old paint on metal bridges, process equipment, and buildings may contain lead. Construction workers are exposed to lead when metal structures are torn down, renovated, or repainted.

When metal covered with lead paint is cut, sanded, heated, burned, or blasted with abrasives, lead gets into the air. Anyone near such work can get lead poisoning.

### The Hazards

Lead is toxic if you breathe or swallow it. It can cause severe anemia and harm reproduction. It can damage your kidneys, brain, and nervous system, too.

The first signs of severe poisoning may be upset stomach (or cramps), weakness, joint pain, and/or being tired. (But lead can harm you even if you don't show these symptoms at first.)

### Protect Yourself

If you are stripping, sanding, heating, cutting, or otherwise disturbing a painted surface — or you are near such work:

- **Ask your contractor if the paint contains lead.** The OSHA hazard communication rules say the contractor must train you if you are exposed. Until you are sure there is no lead, act as if the paint contains lead.

#### **If the paint has lead (or may have lead):**

- **Follow your contractor's special procedures for this work.** OSHA and some states have special rules for work on lead-coated surfaces. OSHA says a contractor must use engineering and work practice controls to prevent lead exposures.
- **Use wet methods,** if you can, to keep down any dust.
- **Before you use a torch for cutting, remove paint.** (Cutting with torches or heating lead paint produces a lead fume.) Use long-handled torches.
- **Use local-exhaust ventilation.**

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- OSHA says use a respirator **only** when other controls are not possible or not enough. (**Do not use a disposable dust mask that is not approved by NIOSH**, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. )
- **If respirators are used, OSHA requires a full respiratory protection program.** The contractor must do an exposure assessment to find out which respirator is needed. A respirator will need at least a NIOSH-approved half-mask with high-efficiency (N-, R-, or P-100) filter protection for lead fumes. Such a mask provides protection for up to 10 times the permissible exposure limit (PEL) for lead fumes.
- A respiratory protection program must include proper selection and fitting of respirators, medical screening of workers to be sure they can wear respirators, and worker training. Correct storage and cleaning of respirators, and an evaluation of the program are needed also.
- **Do not smoke, eat, or drink around work on lead paint.** This is to prevent swallowing lead.
- **Always wash your hands and face before smoking, eating, or drinking.** This is to prevent swallowing lead.
- **Do not wear work clothes home.** Lead dust on your clothes and shoes can poison your family, especially your children.
- **Have your blood-lead level checked.** OSHA says your employer must test your blood-lead level if you are exposed to lead. How often you will need more blood tests will depend on the exposure level. If your blood-lead level is above 50 micrograms per deciliter, OSHA says your employer must give you a different job until you are well. Your employer must also arrange for medical exams.

### **You Should Know**

Representatives of unions, management, and state and local governments have written guidelines for a safe lead-removal program for industrial structures. You can get the guidelines, *Model Specifications for the Protection of Workers from Lead on Steel Structures*, from the Center to Protect Workers' Rights (CPWR) at 301-578-8500.

**For more information**, call your local union, the Center to Protect Workers' Rights (CPWR) (301-578-8500 or [www.cpwr.com](http://www.cpwr.com) ), the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (1-800-35-NIOSH, 1-800-356-4674, or [www.cdc.gov/niosh](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh) ), or OSHA (1-800-321-OSHA or [www.osha.gov](http://www.osha.gov)). Or go to [www.elcosh.org](http://www.elcosh.org).

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